6 Chomsky on Libertarian Socialism
(Reconciling Solidarity and Diversity?)

INTRODUCTION

In the final chapter I want to turn my attention more fully to Chomsky’s ideas on libertarian socialism and their implications for a number of issues in social and political thought. In particular, I want to examine the grounds for arguing that libertarian socialism offers a means by which both Descartes’ and Orwell’s Problems can be challenged. My aim here is to set out and defend a range of ideas that Chomsky sees as central to libertarian socialism while also examining some of the difficulties it faces. There are two main strands to the concluding chapter which help to draw together many of the themes concerning power, knowledge and human nature that I have explored in Chomsky’s work. After introducing what Chomsky has to say about the libertarian socialist tendency and its heritage I will consider the grounds for it that are to be located in Chomsky’s ideas about human nature and freedom. Throughout, my intention is to focus upon Chomsky’s interpretation of libertarian socialism and the primary obstacles to the realisation of such a social order. In addition I will also attempt to defend libertarian socialism, as far as possible, from the counter-claims of its diverse critics.

The central problem facing any form of emancipatory social and political thought grounded in an account of human nature is the following: ‘If libertarian socialism is the most suitable form of social and political organisation for satisfying and realising the deepest aspects of our human nature, then why do current social and political arrangements not resemble it more fully?’ I think that such an answer can be offered but at the same time it is an answer that reveals what thus far has been the fundamental weakness of libertarian socialism.

LIBERTARIAN SOCIALISM: A RECURRING TENDENCY IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

The true end of man ... is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole.

Wilhelm Von Humboldt (Von Humboldt, 1969, p. 16)
Classical libertarian thought is opposed to state intervention in social life, as a consequence of deeper assumptions about human nature and the need for liberty, diversity and free association.

Noam Chomsky (Guerin, 1970, p. xii)

Liberty without socialism is privilege and injustice; socialism without liberty is slavery and brutality.

Michael Bakunin (Bakunin, 1980, p. 127)

Perhaps the central issue facing contemporary social and political thought is a theme that runs throughout modernity, the tension between claims to 'universality' and 'particularity' in social and political thought and practice (Squires, 1993). It is an issue that takes a variety of forms: culture as opposed to nature; the common good and the rights of the individual; nationalism as opposed to internationalism, and so on. In recent times a familiar story about modernist social and political thought has emerged that reads along the following lines: the demise of socialism is based often upon the premise that socialism in modernity led inexorably towards a social order within which the need to homogenise and typologise all peoples into a system dominated by state power was transcendent and where aspirations to diversity were crushed. Such a form of social and political organisation could only end in tragedy as it curbed and challenged the very qualities that render human beings distinct, most importantly, their desire for freedom. Conversely, liberalism as the alternate major political movement of modernity, with its emphasis upon individual liberty and diversity, was, at least temporarily, seen as the beneficiary of the failings of state socialism as ideas about the end of history resurfaced in the wake of the revolutionary movements in Eastern Europe in 1989. Only liberal capitalism, so the argument went, was capable of providing for the essentially idiosyncratic needs and wants of peoples marked most distinctively by their desire to pursue their own, freely-chosen, ends, wherever they took them. Socialism, by contrast, was seen to offer little more than at best a model for society built around a paternalistic and bureaucratic social and political order that tended to sap people's creative instincts and freedom. More recently, liberals too have been much vexed by the universalist claims that underpin liberal capitalism and its own tendency to trample notions of society and community underfoot in the wake of the need for forms of capital accumulation that have shifted from the national to an increasingly global scale (Gray, 1995, 'The Undoing of Conservatism').

Within social and political thought this mood has been reflected in the fragmentation of many old certainties about political ideology and the profusion of a range of new philosophical and theoretical agendas, many influenced by the linguistic turn that I focused upon in earlier chapters. In